

Teaching Tolerance with Turkish Art: Lessons from Gülen and the Turkish Traditional Arts

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Given the current political climate, it is especially important, and especially challenging, to teach American students to become informed and open-minded about Islam. When all they regularly experience are the stories reported on the television and in other media, they have no concept of Islam as it is experienced by the majority of the world's Muslims, nor its long history of peace and tolerance. To be sure, violence exists among some Muslims, and sometimes in the name of Islam, but the same can certainly be said about Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and the majority of the world's great religions. Within the context of teaching the basics of Islam, and a viewpoint of tolerance, to American college students, I outline a methodology which presents the basic tenets of Islam, then introduces students to Islamic art—particularly Turkish traditional arts within the context of a larger program of study which includes analysis of the arts as a means to understand cultural viewpoints. Once students have been exposed to religious fundamentals and recognize the beauty in the art, which stems in large part from religious belief, appropriate writings by Fethullah Gülen become an important confirmation for students that Islam has, at its core, an appreciation for love, beauty, and tolerance, particularly within the mystic tradition of Sufism.

In the classroom, teaching tolerance is one of the goals of the humanities courses which I instruct. One method of understanding and learning to respect others is by understanding their history, beliefs, and artistic achievements. As a teacher of lower-level courses in general humanities, as well as upper level courses in folklore and religion, I have a vested interest in leading students to understand something about Islam. When what they see on the television is uniformly negative, it is important to present a more balanced view in classes.

Fethullah Gülen, the sometimes controversial but generally well-regarded theologian from Turkey, espouses a view of Islam that has roots in Sufism and the study of the Islamic prophetic tradition and theology. Some authors trace his views most recently to the Nur (Light) movement led by Said Nursi (Agai, 2002), although this may not represent an entirely accurate understanding of the influences on Gülen. Turkish artists, especially those who practice the Turkish traditional arts, have an ethic of work and connectedness to God/Allah and the larger community which can be traced, in part, to Sufism and to some of the religious guilds under the Ottoman empire. (Glassie, 1993) The relationship is not as direct as it is in the case of Gülen, but it does seem to be present in the way artists have described their love for God/Allah, community and humanity through their art, their work, and the way their lives are lived in an extensive study published by Henry Glassie in 1993 called *Turkish Traditional Art Today*. At nearly 1000 pages in length, Glassie's study presents a decade of observations and interviews with Turkish traditional artists in many different communities.

Fethullah Gülen, of course, has had many things to say about the importance of teaching and modeling moral behavior as a means of preventing a clash of civilizations, promoting interfaith dialogue, and raising a "golden generation" in a largely secular world. (Agai, 2002) His comments are addressed to Muslims, and arise from the unique situation which exists in Turkey. There, education must be secular in deference to government regulations that came about as a result of the secular movement of Kemal Atatürk. (Agai,

2002) While it is clear that Gülen and his community have reservations about the secular education system, they have chosen to work within it to ensure that students receive a first-rate education, particularly in the sciences and technology. Although one hour of religious instruction is now permitted per week in Turkish schools, educators who adhere to Gülen's theories of education chose to provide moral, and in a sense religious, instruction through the modeling of moral behavior which emphasizes generosity, duty, and adherence to Islamic ideals of behavior. As the Gülen education movement becomes global, students in schools outside of Turkey which are largely supported and staffed by those inspired by Gülen do not always teach Muslim students. (Balci, 2003) The secular emphasis of a curriculum which was developed to conform to Turkish educational guidelines is suited to a global student body. Still, morality and values are still modeled and are based upon Islam.

"From Gülen's perspective, knowledge itself becomes an Islamic value when it is imparted by teachers with Islamic values and who can show students how to employ knowledge in the right and beneficial Islamic way."
(Agai, 2002, p.p. 40-41)

These Islamic values are tolerated in secular and diverse religious environments in which schools are established due in part because they can also be seen as universal values—those which can be found to a greater or lesser extent in Judaism, Islam, Christianity as well as in the Eastern religious traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism.¹ They are also present in a numerous secular ethical philosophies. This emphasis on modeling values rather than directly preaching them is known as *temsil*, as opposed to *teblig* which is an "open declaration and/or persuasion through preaching." (Özdalga 2003, p. 68) To take things a step further, in Gülen's philosophy, the selfless act of teaching and nurturing the young generation itself becomes an act of worship which is suited to the duties of a Muslim.

It can be argued that Gülen and his movement's emphasis on dialogue is related to his educational ideas in some respect—education and understanding foster dialogue, and dialogue fosters education and understanding. The ideals of Gülen's followers, while having been compared to the ideas of Weber and the Protestant ideal of education and hard work, flow from a firm foundation in Turkish identity and Islamic religion. (Özdalga 2003) His emphasis on understanding and dialogue seems to avoid shading over to secular humanism and complete relativism. Equivalents can perhaps be found in modern ecumenical movements, but seem somewhat disassociated from Western secular education with its emphasis on philosophy and ethics, rather than religion per se as a guide for moral behavior.

The reality of teaching in an American secular institution, however, is a better fit with Gülen's ideas than may seem apparent at first. As a teacher in a state-funded university, I do not espouse my religious views in the classroom. I teach religious studies, rather than theology. Many of my students, generally at least half, are not especially secular in orientation. They understand religious faith, at least from their own Protestant Christian perspective. They frequently do not respond well to an education which emphasized solely secular elements and the Western secular, "positivist and materialist" cultural history.

Gülen's ideas about tolerance and dialogue spring from his religious convictions. He is a man of faith. Students are most accustomed to associating persons of Islamic faith with terrorism and intolerance. This message comes through the media, and sometimes through their own churches. Conservative Christianity, as some of them learn it, does not make room

¹ The author wishes to thank comments from the conference committee for clarifying this point.

for other "people of the book" as does Islam. They also arrive in the classroom with the mindset that they must defend their faith in what they perceive as a secular and faithless world.

When instructing these students about the basic tenets of Islam, emphasis on the importance of Jesus/Isa in the Islamic faith is often the first step to getting students to set aside their prejudices and preconceived notions about Islam. Many students with little or no understanding of the teachings of Islam assume that Muslims believe in the divinity of Muhammad and completely reject Jesus as having any religious significance (as they also assume no connection at all to the prophets of the Torah). They are surprised to learn that Jesus is considered a prophet and that Muhammad, while revered as the seal of the prophetic tradition and an example to all believers, is not considered divine.

When I teach about Islam, what usually comes next is a slide show of Islamic art, with particular emphasis upon Turkish traditional arts (as well as the basic structure of the mosque and examples of the mosque, such as the Blue Mosque or the Sulimanye mosque). This parallels lessons about the cultural history of the Western world. By the point in the class when we discuss Islam, students are accustomed to looking at artwork and learning its meanings within the context of Greek and Roman religions, and have learned the basic iconography of Christianity. They understand the connection between religious belief and artistic subject matter and aesthetic. Sometimes this understanding does not come naturally to those students with no background in the arts, or those from Calvinistic Protestant Christianity, where religious art is not part of the faith tradition due to the rejection of the Catholic Christian heritage. Art is a means to cultural understanding that students come to appreciate as an alternative to simply memorizing the important dates and events of history.

When Turkish traditional arts are introduced the students are, at first, simply pleased by the beautiful objects. In a carpet, or a painted plate, the students recognize dedication, skill, and beauty. We discuss the restrictions that Islam puts on art which make it differ from Western art—particularly the Islamic teaching against the figurative art which looms so large in the Western tradition. Then through the viewing of many examples, students begin to explore the richness in Turkish Islamic art—an aesthetic that tends toward the geometric, the complex, to flowers and calligraphy and patterning that reflect the infinite nature of God/Allah. In calligraphy the names of Allah and Muhammad are set in beauty which echoes their importance. The bismillah reminds the faithful of the infinite compassion and mercy of Allah. Students come to appreciate the aesthetic through the fine work which is presented. (Glassie, 1993)

After coming to understand something of the aesthetic represented in the art, I talk about the artists themselves, when I know something about them. Generally speaking, in the history of the Western fine arts tradition, art has become divorced from religious meaning in the last two or three centuries, although religious art can still certainly be found in the folk arts traditions. When one looks globally, this is certainly not the case in all locations and within all traditions. More often than not, religion is one of the major guides to artistic tradition and process. Individuality and novelty are also primarily Western characteristics of fine art. That is also not the case globally. To understand the nature of art, community and religion it is helpful to know what the artists themselves say about their work.

Glassie (1993) finds that religion is important to many Turkish artists whom he interviews. "In Istanbul, not all the artisans are Muslims, there are a few Armenians among them, nor are all deeply religious. Still, I would generalize that the role of master artisan is filled by men whose religiosity exceeds that of the general population's and whose belief in

social order is deep and constant." (p. 71) He finds this as he travels to other cities in Turkey as well. For many artists, their creation of beautiful things is done as work which is pleasing, work which can be done in the name of Allah. This also holds true for women, particularly those who weave carpets during the winter when work in the fields is minimal. Hard work that results in beautiful and useful things is an activity that is right for a believer

"Useful to another, the fine strong object becomes a gift to social unity, to the joy of brotherhood, a brotherhood that expands from the heart to include all of humankind. We belong, they tell me [Glassie], to different nations, but we are all one people. There is at last the single nation of humanity, and love is its governing power. The craftsman's love is materialized in the immanent excellence and patent utility in the things he makes." (p. 72)

While individuality is not largely emphasized in the Turkish traditional arts, at least not in terms of the radical innovation which is so valued in the Western fine arts, recognition of the skills of individual masters is. Masters become teachers, and the traditions is continued on to another generation. Masters also have the responsibility to lead lives which are a guide to younger artisans, and to look out for the welfare of their students. In this the social order is confirmed and maintained while the tradition is continued. According to Glassie, religion and Turkish identity are at the center of the social order, and artists are deeply enmeshed in all their stability. (pp. 49-50) Art, in its creation, usefulness, and enjoyment, maintains the social order and demonstrates individual love and cleanliness of heart.

According to carpet repairer Hagop Barin, whom Glassie interviewed extensively, appreciating the examples of art helps one to appreciate the creator, the best of the creator.

"Hagop had told me [Glassie] that 'in every carpet there is a different hand. Every hand is different.' Later, he shifted from the hand to the heart. 'It is hard to explain,' he said. 'In every carpet there is a person's heart—not the person's dirtiness, but their thoughts and feelings, their extreme cleanliness. Because of that, I see them, I love them.'" (pp. 100, 103)

The recurring theme of love in Glassie's conversation with traditional artists he believes (as do others) can be traced, at least in part, to the affiliation of artisan guilds going back to the 13th and 14th century with Sufi orders. (Glassie 1993, p. 916) The concept of love, says Glassie, is not the only concept which can be traced to Sufism that is part of the vocabulary of the Turkish artisan. A partial set of these concepts includes: brotherhood, service, acceptance, discipline, balance, unity, love, heart, and the chain of masters. These are some of the same concepts that we see in the writings of Fethullah Gülen who is also influenced by Sufism.

Gülen himself traces virtue, morality, and love to the best forms of art, particularly Turkish achievements in the arts which were unaffected or little affected by the trends and excesses of egotism in Western art of the 19th and 20th centuries. (Gülen 2005, p. 35, 39, 120) In *The Statue of our Souls: Revival in Islamic Thought and Activism* (2005, English translation), Gülen calls for a renaissance of the best elements of Turkish culture, those that espouse virtue and morality, religion and belief. He cites specifically some of the great architects, such as Sinan, whose work reflects a deep understanding of faith and embodies it in beauty and greatness. Those Western influences most antithetical to Turkish achievements in art have derailed the efforts of Turkish artists, and things need to be set back on track. This is possible, even likely, according to Gülen given the revival and return to important values

taking place today. Art can be a touchstone of virtue and a rock of religious truth and understanding.

“As long as we can recover our thoughts, feelings, methods, and philosophy, it will suffice to bring them together to find that heavenly and immortal style of ours. That is why, as I see it, we should first of all re-examine all the roads that we are going to take and repair and reinforce them once again. Quintessential to our renaissance are the inspiration and fruitfulness of religious zeal, a reassuring atmosphere, firmness, gravity, sobriety, and wisdom in our reasoning and logic; stability and humanism that give us the freedom to be ourselves; philosophical depth, refinement and contemplative abstraction in our arts and philosophy; and that all these should have the quality of being logical at the core and inspired by revelation.” (Gülen 2005, p. 29)

Gülen goes so far as to list understanding of art as the eighth attribute of those who will inherit the earth. Given his focus on science and logic, it is significant that he considers art to be of vital importance. Gülen himself is a poet, an artist of words, and several of his poems published in *The Broken Plectrum* (Kirik Mizrap) have been set to music by popular Turkish singers.²

Once students have seen the art and learned some of the very basic concepts of Islam, some of the philosophy of Gülen begins to become more understandable. In such accessible works for Western readers as *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* (2004), one can introduce American college students to ideas of tolerance and love that spring from Islam, rather than operating in contradistinction to Islam. Gülen, as a deeply religious man who uses that faith distinctly as a foundation for dialogue and tolerance. For students who are not especially religious, Gülen’s ideas about tolerance and understanding fit well within the context of a pluralistic society such as the United States. This is familiar territory for some of them. For the religious student, particularly a student who comes from a conservative Christian background, they recognize in Gülen a person who has not abandoned his religious faith in order to make compromises with the secular world. Unlike the message that students sometimes get in the United States (or at least misconstrue liberal political discourse as advocating)—that relativism needs to be taken to the point of no set moral code of behavior in order for one to function in a modern, pluralistic society, Gülen provides a model for behavior guided by religious principles that also advocates understanding. This, in my opinion, gives his ideas credibility with religious students that he would not otherwise have.

Beauty can be seen in art, and in the concepts of love and tolerance. Students are relieved to find both in Islam. I say relieved because each semester students tell me that they don’t understand why “Muslims hate us,” as if all Muslims lived their lives in anger and hatred. In my experience, while a history lesson in the relationship between the Muslim and Christian world is in order in for them to understand the political and cultural grievances that exist in the Middle East and other parts of the world that are largely Islamic in belief, the lesson is better absorbed when students understand the foundations of love, peace, and tolerance which are also a longstanding part of the Islamic faith and cultural tradition.

Toward that end, essays in *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* by M. Fethullah Gülen (2004) provide an understandable and clear statement of that faith tradition. The essays, while not always written expressly for non-Islamic readers, are concise and do not assume a great depth of understanding of Islam in order to be valuable. There are also essays

² Again, the author is indebted to the comments by the conference committee for this information.

which are addressed specifically to American and non-Islamic audiences. For first and second year students who are taking a broad Humanities survey, Gülen's "Message Concerning the September 11th Terrorist Attacks" provides a short, simple, and unequivocal statement condemning the attacks from a Muslim viewpoint. While it is clear that the situation surrounding the September 11 attacks is complex, and arguments can and should be made for at least attempting to understand global dissatisfaction toward the political and cultural hegemony propounded by the United States, and its relationship to the Muslim civilizations in particular, students often cannot move beyond their anger at the event to understand its causes. Such a direct statement as what follows softens the heart and opens it to understanding:

"I [Gülen] would like to make it very clear that any terrorist activity, no matter by whom it is carried out or for what purpose, is the greatest blow to peace, democracy, and humanity. For this reason, no one—and certainly no Muslim—can approve of any terrorist activity. Terror has no place in a quest to achieve independence or salvation. It takes the lives of innocent people. ...Please let me reassure you that Islam does not approve of terrorism in any form. Terrorism cannot be used to achieve any Islamic goal. No terrorist can be a Muslim, and no real Muslim can be a terrorist. Islam demands peace, and the Qur'an demands that every real Muslim be a symbol of peace and work to support the maintenance of basic human rights. ...Moreover, Prophet Muhammad stated that a Muslim is a person who does no harm with either the hands or with the tongue." (Gülen, 2004, p. 261)

Other essays from *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* are appropriate for higher class levels, when topics can be explored in more depth. "As a New World is Being Built" offers some of the same ideas with more background. "Human Rights in Islam" assures students that advocacy of human rights is not only found in a democratic government (although I do acknowledge that there are times when one might argue persuasively that human rights are sometimes not a central feature of U.S. political policy). "Islam—A Religion of Tolerance" and "Islam As a Religion of Universal Mercy" help students with a more nuanced understanding of the foundations of tolerance and mercy in the Islamic faith. The articles on Sufism help lead interested students to want to learn more about the mystic tradition of Sufism and its emphasis on love of Allah/God and its inevitable positive consequences in love for all humanity.

Of course, Gülen's writings are a vast sea and I do not pretend to have a sophisticated enough understanding of Islam to claim an in depth understanding of some of his more complex ideas. Still, an emphasis on love, tolerance, and beauty in Islam, introduced through the accessible vehicle of Turkish traditional art and then some of the writings of theologian and philosopher Fethullah Gülen have been useful teaching tool in my classroom. In order for students to realize their potential, they must be educated. In order for them to become responsible global citizens, they must strive to understand. This technique is one means to that understanding. Each semester students return to tell me that even the very simplistic understanding of Islam and the intents of Muslims, the eternal words of the Holy Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad lead them to question what they see in the media, and lead them to engage in productive dialogue with Muslim classmates. My thanks to Mr. Gülen for his reaching out to non-Muslim readers with his words of faith and tolerance.

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